

CARNAL

SOMEWHERE OVER 40 WINKS



ROM LcOFEEER

Somewhere ***carnal*** over 40 winks

Rom LcO'Feer

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Somewhere ***carnal*** over 40 winks

For my dear mommy.

She is the second best gift from heaven.

1

LET THERE BE

All that distinguishes one from his twin uniquely sets us apart.

Ipswich, England

Every beautiful story begins with a sun-smiling day. The sky is unnaturally dark as if to foretell the apocalyptic end of the world. It is midday but feels like midnight. The gloomy clouds pour down curtains of rain. A man with a small blue bird on his shoulder urges his steps out of a bank into the sludgy street. His umbrella is tilted deep down and his face is entirely obscured. In no time, the lower part of his pants gets drenched. He doesn't bother to avoid puddles. At each step his wet shoes squeak like a baby frog croaking. The man, noticeably fragile and shy, is in his mid 40's with light brown hair that covers most of his green eyes. The center of his attention is habitually evasive. The name shown on his bank account is Whud. Judging from the bulge of his pocket, he has withdrawn a good sum of money. As he just turns around the corner of the bank building into a nearby alley, two gunshots are heard from inside the bank. Though the sound is muffled by the rain, it can't be mistaken. It is immediately followed by the noise of people shouting. Whud stops and drops his umbrella. His hands clutch both of his ears, and his eyes are closed tight. In agony he shakes his head violently.

"Ah No! God, please, no!"

He kneels down on the wet ground and shakes with anguish. Lightning passes swiftly across the black sky, and its echoing thunder shakes the ground. The bird flutters its wings to balance itself and struggles to stay on Whud's shoulder. A moment later, two masked men rush out of the building to their car, still firing at the bank. They shout something vile to each other and then drive away, spilling ugly screeching noise behind. Whud moans uncontrollably and struggles to hold in a scream. It's not clear if the running water on his face is rain or tears.

A charley horse marched into the house, trod upon my calves, and tortured my ill-prepared soul.

Now, along with other serious men at a poker table, Whud's expressionless face is seen on the casino surveillance screens from various angles. Watchful eyes intensely scrutinize his every movement. The bluish bird with a bright orange beak sits quietly

on his shoulder. There is something disquietingly human about its gaze. Whud's mind seems still clouded even though the rain let up hours ago. No one knows if he enjoys playing poker, but it pays the bills and calms his empty stomach. Whud's hands aren't always great, and yet he has a knack for knowing exactly what to bet and when to fold. Heavy silence fills the room quickly after each bet. The players sit with such an economy of body movement that you could almost hear their thoughts. With high stakes, the game can easily risk a yearly salary. Whud sits completely still, his eyes shut, his thoughts virtually unreadable. Eyes can betray the heart's secrets.

Robotically and repeatedly, the cards are shuffled, handed, and examined. The fine grains of time quickly flow down the throat of hourglass. At last, Whud, still expressionless, collects a big pile of chips and stands up to leave. The cameras pick up the gloomy eyes, half suspicious and half incredulous, which follow him as he leaves. Two hours' gaming has passed. Sitting in shock, trying to register what has just happened, no one else moves. One player quietly mutters under his breath, not to anyone in particular,

"Wow! I'll be . . ."

He shyly looks around the table, but other players don't seem to be in a mood for after-game chatter.

Despite several previous protests, the guy upstairs slammed the door thunderously loud.

At present, Whud is in a taxi on the way to his log house, located at the back of beyond. The driver makes an attempt to strike up a conversation with her passenger, but Whud's terse answers discourage any further tries. She turns up the radio. Cabbies possess a superpower to detect the passenger's mood at the speed of light. The driver sneaks a peek at the bird on Whud's shoulder through the rearview mirror. The taxi arrives at the log house and is soon gone. It is expensive to get to the house from civilization but Whud finds what he needs in this forsaken place, the ultimate solitude. Time crawls here. Whud sits on a swing bench and gives it a gentle push. Susie sits next to him and leans her head on Whud. The middle-aged man seems happiest when he is with her. With grey hair and a touch of arthritis, Susie is probably as old as Whud, but her personality is unlike his. Always enjoying company, she is extremely sociable. Whenever someone visits the house, she cannot contain her excitement, for visitors are scarce. Humming an unfamiliar tune, Whud caresses Susie's hair, and she contentedly appreciates each tender touch. The scene is as peaceful as a heart-warming painting. Whud pauses and looks up at the sky full of dark passing clouds. Somehow, he looks much older than his age. The small bird's merry singing floats from inside the house. Abruptly, Whud turns his head and glances in my direction as though he senses my presence.

Key West, Florida, USA

A sea of people pours into the streets where Ocean breezes refresh everyone. Something about Key West reminds of your childhood, with full of surprises that turn your heart glad. Here on this small island, the sun appears to be brighter, and the houses look like ones out of a fairy tale. As my grandpa put it, every paradise on earth is colonized by oldies and homos. Key West isn't an exception. Among the grey-haired people, obvious cross-dressers hand out flyers, and same-gendered couples openly display affection. A small restaurant called *Déjà vu* is vibrant with people having lunch. The outdoor seats next to the ocean are particularly popular. A fat customer with brown eyes hasn't touched the restaurant's signature meal at all. A couple of birds on top of the chair across the table are interested in the under-appreciated food, waiting impatiently for the right moment to hop on it. Among the happy and relaxed people, the obese customer stands out just for being alone. The loner normally uses random names but wears a tattooed 'Fave' now and again. I wonder how long the chair can carry the customer's weight. Pretending to read a newspaper, Fave has been glancing at a woman for hours now. Oblivious to her full-time stalker, she joyfully chats with her friends at a distant table. The brown eyes are full of aching sadness. Longing isn't enough a word. For some reason, the chubby customer abruptly glances up, looks around, then ducks back behind the newspaper.

The smoke detector from the next door cried its guts out.

The afternoon sun with its fully naked back is lazily sailing across the sky. This time, I follow Fave to Sloppy Joe's bar. The fat customer soon strikes up conversation with a stranger and laughs with him over something. The loner is definitely in a good mood. I'm afraid that the skinny stool at the bar might break at any moment under Fave's elephantine body weight. The bartender decides to entertain his customers with a blonde joke, a rather dirty one. Having filled a beer glass to the brim with dead precision, the barman leans forward and asks a question, anticipating the punch line.

"Do you know what the blonde said?"

He waits expectantly. Smiling eagerly, Fave slowly shakes a 'no'. The guy next to the loner quickly finishes his beer, wipes his mouth on the sleeve, and asks impatiently,

"What? What did she say?"

The bartender pauses for dramatic effect and responds with a smirk,

"Hold this tight while I'm looking for that."

The stranger next to Fave is mildly amused. In contrast, the chubby customer almost dies laughing. The wooden chair squeaks under the heavy weight, and the four layers of Fave's chin fold and unfold. The bartender has already told this joke to Fave a thousand times. Key West has been this loner's home for more years than anyone knows, but the loner has no friends, acquaintances, or derivations thereof. Most of the regulars at the bar have acquainted with Fave. For example, the bartender, Frank, told the outcast that despite his cute look, he has been dumped innumerable times because of his insecurity. It is one of many things Frank has gotten off his chest to

Fave. I also remember him telling Fave under his breath that his last boyfriend called him 'shallow as a plate'. Yet tonight Frank doesn't recognize his secret bearer. The bartender isn't the only one. Many people in Key West have opened their hearts to the loner, believing that the tourist with brown eyes is just a visitor, here today and gone tomorrow. People prefer to share secrets with a total stranger than with their best friends – no string attached. Take it from me. That's how the cracker cracks. Indeed, we are all hypocrites. For Fave, the trickiest part is names: the outsider must take care not to call someone by name before it is given afresh. After several mistakes, Fave has decided to avoid using names altogether. I am not sure how the loner, stranded in a crowd, manages such an unstable lifestyle. We humans want to be a private garden rather than a public park. We want to be owned. We want to be closely held. Fixed residence, an identification card, a bank account, and a telephone number are all essential for a person's security. They are some of the first things people sort out as soon as they move, especially if they've relocated to another country. Once they're set, one hard fact is conveniently ignored: that life on this rock is fleeting. To my amazement, Fave has managed to get by with not so much as a suitcase and has led the life of a perpetual tourist, always on the outside looking in. Almost everyone has a next of kin, but I'm not aware of any of Fave's relations. It must be unsettling to have no home to return to. I'm no shrink, but it must have done something to Fave's mental state. Probably it's why this modern-day gypsy is easily agitated and swears plentifully over nothing.

A lightning bolt split the sky, and thunder shook my nest violently.

Stars are sprinkled all over the silky black sky. I've trailed the outcast to mainland Florida tonight. The display windows in a jewelry store reflect Fave's dispassionate fat face. In the dark shop window, the jewels look like worthless pieces of broken glass. Fave smashes the transparent case with a small hammer and draws out handfuls of gems. In the process, one of Fave's fingers is cut slightly and starts to bleed. The thief mutters some nasty swear words to ease the pain. Until this point in time, I didn't know that 'canary' could be used in a cursing phrase. The obese thief sucks the bleeding finger and winces. Bloodstains are everywhere. Security cameras dutifully capture the criminal frame-by-frame. The thief drops some jewels on the floor. The fat injured finger is in the way, especially as Fave begins to rush. The police will be here at any moment. Fave pauses, throws a quick glance at the pricey jewels on another shelf, and decides to pass them by. Time is running out. Fave bags the loot and leaves the store deafened by the wailing alarm. The fearless thief has struck again. To be sure, this is anything but enjoyable for Fave. This kind of rush isn't pleasurable or healthy, but not many options are open for survival. The jewelry thief can ignore the queer armpit odor, but the swinging potbelly is always in the way. Even a short walk puts the thief out of breath. Annoyed by the plump body, Fave swears now and again. It's no big deal. Before long, the clumsy body will be shed aside.

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

I just can't get the story straight about this man. He is featured in a recent issue of *Time*, but regarding his past, very little is mentioned in the article. As far as I know, it is deeply buried, out of human reach. The picture on the front page reveals that he is a stout man in his late 50's with blue eyes just like his late brother, if he is his real brother. I can't tell anything for sure. His expression is mysterious, his eyes unreadable. His name printed in the front page is Quos which is what he has on his passport and his social security card. Again, I can't verify whether or not Quos was the name his parents picked for him. When you have no past, you can become virtually anyone.

Everybody in the world recognizes him as a genius who first came up with a noble ultimate theory on life, the universe, and everything else. His grand unified theory is supposed to surpass its precedents by miles. Titled as Full Circle theory, it is simple yet powerful, unambiguous but expressive, and specific yet encompassing. Or, at least that is how scientists typically describe it. Cutting across all human cultures and races in existence, this ultimate theory has been widely applied and readily accepted. Even everyday people turn to it to reinterpret the laws of physics and the nature of human life. A new systematic numerical science grew out of Quos' theory and has vigorously challenged the adequacy of the existing mathematics. Moreover, a new religion called Circlian was founded on the theory's ideological interpretation of the meaning of life. The religious group has its own scriptures which put forward a deep understanding of the purpose and the salvation of the human soul. Its membership has grown rapidly and steadily. Circlian is sanctioned even by countries whose governments strictly deny other religions. Those governments have shown it favoritism because its doctrine explicitly denies the existence of deities. Quos has earned the title of the scientist of the millennium and is nicknamed Fabulous Einstein in the news magazine. I deny that he is the inventor of the theory. I know a scientist when I see one, and he is far from being a physicist by all the units of measure. Like a fungus, doubt has spread over the facts about Quo, but there isn't any evidence to back my claim, and I know no one else who shares my view. All I know is who he truly is not.

The general public doesn't know much about his funny corners. His green hair, red tattoos, and golden toe-rings aren't absurd alongside his other oddities. He spends most of his morning putting on makeup, which I find far from being manly. He carries a silver spoon everywhere, and I often catch sight of him polishing it obsessively. I wonder if he was born with it in his mouth.

The fake scientist normally wears a blank expression, as hard to interpret as a tail-less dog. Oftentimes I have spotted him murmuring to himself about who knows what. Though he talks and acts normally most of the time, it becomes apparent soon that he doesn't share common sense with the rest of us. Grossly weird, that's the word. Nothing should be wanting in his life. Nevertheless, Quos rarely looks mirthful in spite of fame, never-withering wealth, youthful health, and a highly desirable wife.

I am extra cautious whenever I need to approach this false Einstein. Once he finds out that I have observed him in secret, a fearful thing worse than death will fall upon me. This isn't the only reason I dread being in his orbit.

In the beginning, not knowing his true nature, I casually hung around him. Whenever I was in the same room with him, aside from getting a splitting headache, I was seized by an eerie feeling that someone was staring at me, like a chilly hand on the back of my neck. You know the creepy feeling you get when you are all alone down in a stranger's dark cellar. I had to scream. Let my soul go! I just can't bear the uncomfortable experience. So I have made every effort to avoid him. Thinking back, I feel a fresh shiver creeping down my spine. Quos has masterfully covered up all the horrific crimes his fingers have committed. To him, killing is a game, and law-breaking is a joke. The hideous Einstein has murdered people with impartial cruelty, as violent with innocent children, defenseless elderly folks, and life-carrying women as with everyone else. Like a savage predator, he lacks all empathy. Quos has successfully robbed me of the faith in human nature. Nightmares about his heartless crimes have haunted me for years. No one but me fears him. It is the infinite loneliness of being enlightened. In fact, all other people admire him without limit. Dyeing hair green was uncharacteristically popular among middle-aged men for a while, and the trend hasn't died out to this day.

This beloved scientist doesn't have a job. To be more precise, not a living soul knows if Quos has ever held a job. It is anyone's guess where his ill-gotten dollars come from. At his grand palace, he has an army of housekeepers, several chauffeurs for the train-long limousines, top class pilots for his silver private jet, and most importantly a personal detective and computer whiz, John. The word egghead must be coined just for his look. The geek serves Quos like a butler with single-minded submission. Quos treats him with the contempt for a filthy untouchable wild dog. His body language speaks loud that John should feel infinitely honored to be near his shadow. At times, I can't help but wonder if the detective has anything going on in his life other than carrying out his master's orders. Due to my fear of Quos, I poke around John's office while avoiding the slimy tentacles of the sinister scientist. The type of information the private eye collects usually reflects what occupies Quos' mind.

As expected, today John is in his office alone. His desk is covered with newspapers and magazines. The story he has investigated lately is about squirrels in Alabama, especially about the ecological effects of their massacre. It was headline news years ago. According to the report, prominent public health officials had discovered that the squirrels in Alabama started to spread a deadly infectious disease to humans and pigs. These rodents in Alabama and surrounding states have been hunted down or poisoned ever since. One article on John's desk grips my attention. It reads that a male squirrel can smell a female in heat from far away, up to a mile. Something you always wanted to know. While I am wondering why Quos has a keen interest in the rodent story, John's office door is suddenly slung open, and Quos himself bursts in. Trembling from fear, I instinctively flinch. Quos doesn't seem to care about John's puzzled expression. While chattering its teeth, my scared soul lets out a long scream. John frowns. Quos looks around as if he expects to find someone else in the room. He pulls out the silver spoon from his pocket and starts to polish it obsessively. His

eyes are fastened on it. Soon I get an unbearable, skull-splitting headache and feel naked to something intrusive and malevolence. John's frown deepens. I need to get out of here while the getting is good.

Stillwater, Oklahoma, USA

I have followed Exa for several months now. The mightily shy black woman is in her late 20's with no African-American accent whatsoever. I met her for the first time at a Greyhound bus station in Oklahoma. A bus driver was glued to his rearview mirror, sneakily peeping at Exa. The black girl was fearlessly trendy, her supermodel physique bewitching. Her slim long legs went nicely with her deer-like neck. Fashion statements dripped from every corner of her clothing and her accessories. The guys at the bus station also frisked her body with their eyes. Behold, Attraction herself has been incarnated! When I say attraction I am not talking about a perfectly-proportioned face. You know the type; the one that instantly flings you to the land of boredom. Instead, Exa's angular facial structure is architecturally unique and resembles a cubist's artwork. Holding a ticket to Kansas, she was waiting for her bus door to open. It wasn't her exceptional fashion taste or her eye-catching body curvature that arrested my attention but her baffling behavior. Instead of looking past me, Exa stared straight at me several times, her face becoming increasingly confused. I turned around to see if she was looking at someone behind me. There was no one in sight. I thought, "What could be the meaning of this?" Curiosity got better of me. I decided to travel with her to Kansas. Exa got on the bus and sat on the seat right behind the driver, which is statistically the most unsafe seat in the event of an accident. I took one right across from her. The bus journey was painfully boring as the scenery was rarely changed, an unbroken field under a vast sky. The only diversion was the cows that occasionally zipped past. I could hear a group of Hispanic passengers laughing and giggling freely in the far back. I wondered why Mexicans were easily pleased and quick to laugh. There must be something special about the chili pepper in their food. It was one of many random thoughts I entertained to fight off the boredom. Our vehicle made a short stop at a bus station, which failed to refresh my mind. I noticed that Exa was intensely reading a book, maybe to keep herself amused during the tedious journey. Now I think about it, it must have been her diary. Several times on the bus, I caught her throwing a cautious glance in my direction. And then the same puzzled look followed. The driver started to turn the bus around slowly. For some reason, Exa paused her reading, gathered her things, got up, apologized to the driver, and hurriedly got off the bus. The bus station was still far from Exa's final destination in Kansas. The vehicle started to move and soon gained full speed. Exa's gaze steadily followed me until the bus was out of sight. Later that day the evening news reported that the Greyhound bus to Kansas had had a fatal accident a couple of miles from the stop where Exa got off. No one survived the accident. No one except Exa and me.

As her usual Wednesday routine on the way home from her university, Exa is now visiting a department store buzzing with disoriented customers. First, Exa stops at a clothing store and tries on a colorful blouse in a changing room. Turning this way and that, she enjoys looking at herself in the mirror. The blouse is bold but looks glamorous on her. Exa quickly changes back to her own clothes and hesitantly puts the clothing back to its original place. Her wishful fingers touch its fabric as though it were a departing lover's shoulder. Now she moves on to a cosmetic store, goes directly to the perfume section, and sprays a tester on her wrists. By now, most of the staff should recognize her window shopping pattern – to be more precise, her misuse of freebies. Exa remains casual about it. After an escalator ride, she walks to a flower shop and buys a single pink rose. It is halfway to full bloom. Around her, other shoppers hop from one item to another, battling impulsive cravings for tempting sales. Exa walks toward a jewelry section to use a mirror. Moving slowly, she acts as if the whole department store belonged to her. Her fingers fasten the rose in her hair with a pin, her head slightly tilted and her last three fingers extended. The flower stands out against her dark braided hair. Putting her two hands on her hips and pushing one shoulder slightly forward, Exa tries out a seductive wink at herself in the mirror. A shop assistant notices her but shrugs as if saying 'Whatever'. Exa opens her diary, and her eyes quickly pick up something from it. She always carries the notebook with her and looks at it untiringly, like a lost tourist glued to a map. I wonder what kind of secrets live in the journal. Changing from her usual routine, Exa stops at a small Chinese grocery store. The shopkeeper spots her rose and pleasantly greets her with a full smile. Exa asks if the shop carries long distance calling cards.

Another telemarketer with an annoyingly friendly voice called to yap about an unbelievable credit card deal.

Whenever Exa passes by a house, she looks at her diary and at the house number. In her neighborhood, the residential buildings look similar. She looks relieved when she finally reaches her house with a pastel pink door. Throughout the evening, Exa regularly looks at the grandfather clock, at her diary, and then at the clock again. The cuckoo from the wall clock pops out of its wooden house and chirps 11 times. At the last cuckoo, Exa quickly changes into nondescript clothing and puts on sunglasses. The bright pink rose is still pinned in her hair, but she doesn't seem aware of it.

Exa walks several blocks with her diary held tight at her side. The evening street is warmly illuminated by the full moon. She spots a public telephone booth, looks around cautiously, and steps into the tall box. The area is too deserted for her to be alone safely at this unholy hour. My attention is instinctively led astray by a ghostly white cat in the distance. It pauses, turns its head, and looks straight at me for uncomfortable seconds as if trying to send me a mental message. The animal with glowing green eyes soon hurries into a dark alley. The eerie image of the cat lingers in my mind. What does it mean? It can't be a good sign. Luckily, I spot a wooden panel on a nearby building and quickly knock on it three times. Is he around? I look around with an uneasy feeling. Is another suicide in the making? My attention leaps back to Exa. She places a call using the prepaid calling card that she bought earlier today. At the dial tone her eyes are rolled to the side. She spreads her diary open and

cups the receiver with her hand as if she didn't want to spill a single drop of her voice.

"Hello, the police station? Oh help me, please!"

I am measurably startled and thrown off by her genuinely scared voice. It makes my hair curl. I didn't see that coming at all. Her sobbing voice slightly trembles. A herd of startled silence scurries away from the telephone booth.

"I'm terribly scared. Oh God!"

This is the first time that I have ever heard her speaking in a normal way. I guess reading is no problem. Exa pauses for an extended moment. The policeman must be trying the usual calming-down procedure. Her panicky whisper continues on.

"A stranger just broke into my house! God! I think he is in the living room now. I really don't know what to do. Oh God!"

With a rough breathing Exa listens intensely. Her hand is holding the phone dearly tight and the veins on her hand are clearly visible. She whispers with every caution.

"I believe so. Yes."

The cheerful rose in her hair goes against the emotion Exa is portraying now. She closes her eyes tight as if in a great pain, and speaks in a hysterical tone.

"I briefly saw him with a gun. I'm sure I saw it. I hope he didn't see me. I am so scared. Please help me!"

Intentionally making a couple of mistakes, Exa lets the officer jot down an address from her diary. Her voice vibrates with anticipated fear.

"Please, send someone here quickly."

A dog howls a block away. After hurriedly saying she has to hide herself somewhere safe, Exa promptly hangs up. The address she has just given, however, is not here in Oklahoma but somewhere in Kansas.

Seoul, South Korea

The streets are empty, the brown cows on the hills are neglected, the thickset markets are silent, and the rice fields are unattended. Some policemen on duty frequently glance at portable televisions in their cars. Cabbies drive in autopilot mode while listening to the radio. In front of electric shops, pedestrians are gathered around the screens displayed for sale. All the TVs at restaurants, bars, shops, public baths, and office rest areas are tuned to one program. The World Cup final game is on. The whole country grinds to a halt to watch its team in the palm-sweating match. Many Koreans traveled miles to witness the historic game. The current score is a tie. Feelings are running high. There are only 10 minutes to go. The whole stadium is fully charged with the intensity of the match. The players are as aggressive as a pack of ravenous wolves. Every second hurriedly slips away into the past. Even a tiny mistake is unacceptable. In the stadium, the Koreans in red shirts start to call on a name with one voice.

"Gee, nah-wah-lah! Gee, nah-wah-lah!"

My Korean colleague, Sunny, tells me that it approximately means "Gee, come on out." Gee is a kind of a dark horse. His appearance at the final game has been hinted

in Korean media without any specifics. Sunny says a reliable source predicted that the mysterious man, affectionately nicknamed Wonderboy, would fly out like Superman to save the Korean team.

Soon, a player exchange happens on the Korean side. With a roaring scream, all the Korean spectators at the stadium stand to welcome the new player. Probably they hope that he is the dark horse. The new guy goes through a typical exchange routine with an exhausted main fielder. Wonderboy walks out to the soccer field and into the ocean of human cries. The Korean spectators refuse to sit down and start to sing a Korean song. A tidal wave of rejuvenating energy sweeps the stadium. Some Korean supporters throw angry stares at the group of black teenagers who are making oink-oink sounds. The new guy better be spectacular in a situation like this.

Yet you can't tell just by looking at him. With the physique of a sumo player, he stands out like a sore thumb among the fit men. His well-developed breasts are visible from a mile away. Wonderboy never runs but manages to jog a little. Waiting is all he does. The spectators would have thrown shoes at him if the situation was not deadly serious. More importantly, the change in the tactic of the Brazilian team clearly speaks out how dangerous the fat player can be. Like satellites two black players mark Gee closely wherever he goes. At such a critical time as this, giving up those players to man-to-man a chubby guy seems far from being wise. With no moment wasted, the game goes back into a full swing. Wonderboy is already out of breath and his uniform soon starts to get darkly damp with sweat. He stays in the center circle of the midfield like a mother fish watchfully protecting her eggs. The spectators can't sit still. Several attempts are made to pass the ball to the porky guy, but Gee is too slow and clumsy to outrun two Brazilian players. Wonderboy even looks scared. Only three and half minutes are left. The crowd starts to scream, and it energizes my soul. Both teams are getting more aggressive and fight for every inch. At long last, a bald Korean player drives the ball toward Gee by dodging the Brazilian players as if Wonderboy himself was the goal area. When the hairless player executes a precise header and passes the ball to Gee, the strangest thing happens. While the black players turn around to tackle him, Gee twists his body and readies his right foot. No one blinks. Before the ball hits the ground, the fat player kicks it with all his might. Every eye is wide open. Wonderboy stares intensely at the spinning ball. His chest is going up and down for oxygen. The ball seems to be too far from the post, but it slowly arcs into the goal. Other players stand rigidly, awestruck. The ball is too fast to catch. The whole audience is stunned into a sudden silence. A baby is crying at a corner somewhere in the stadium.

The eyes of each and every spectator follow the ball crossing the field. The goalkeeper readies himself, spreads his legs apart, and puts gloved hands on his thighs. Losing no momentum, the ball shoots forward, heading right between the goal posts. When it finally makes a contact with the goalie's two raised palms and his broad chest, the netkeeper makes a momentary broad grin. The Brazilian players swiftly turn around to strike back. Wait a second! The goalkeeper is frozen. What's happening? The ball keeps going, dragging him back, carrying him into midair, and finally throwing him into the net. The Korean crowd at the stadium goes wild, and Koreans all over the world scream. Probably, you could have heard the shout from the moon. Wonderboy covers his mouth with his hand and giggles.

Every camera instantly focuses on Gee. He looks shy about his goal, still puffing for air. The last whistle is blown, and the game is over. The people at the stadium enthusiastically applaud Wonderboy for the miracle goal. He doesn't seem to know how to react and scratched his head as if saying he was just lucky. The reporters at the stadium rush to interview Gee. On noticing a big crowd flocking toward him, his eyes dart about in panic, possibly looking for something or someone. The Koreans in the stadium are overcome, and they continue to shout and sing. With his mouth closed tight, Gee manages to walk away from the wild crowd. For sure, this chubby player will be the talk of the nation for months. Sunny with a heavy Asian accent tells me that his people won't sleep tonight but will go out to celebrate all night. The squares, the streets, and the bars will be packed with victory-drunken people. He wishes he were back in his home country with his own folks. The highlights of the game will be replayed a thousand times on TV for weeks, he adds.

I need to talk about Sunny. The jolly man has helped me understand Asian cultures, especially with my secret investigation on Wonderboy. I have learned from other colleagues that Sunny is shacking up with an American single mother. Although we are on friendly terms at work, he doesn't tell me much about himself or his life. Probably it's a Korean thing. I should be careful not to generalize my view on Korea or Koreans. Most of the things I know about the Asian country are from what Sunny has told me or what I have learned by observing him. In addition, I have developed a habit of visiting Korea from time to time, watching over random people or arbitrary events to acquaint myself with the country. At every visit, I am jolted by a little culture shock.

Sunny is somewhat ambitious, a workaholic. Other than that, he gets along well with everyone, and his politeness is easily noticed. Sunny even seems to know how to deal with our evil boss from a warm part of hell. Despite over two decades' stay in America, his Korean side is still intact. It took a while to get used to his accent, and I still struggle with some of his words. The Korean colleague often laughs heartily like the Hispanic people on the Greyhound to Kansas. Sometimes he confuses me because he smiles not only when he is amused but also when he feels sheepish, apologetic, at a loss, or embarrassed, like Bulgarians who shake their heads when they agree with you.

A week after the World Cup game, I manage to locate Gee's house in Korea. Here, I find him with his housemate, Han. With slit eyes like a cunning old rat and ugly thin lips like a sly snake, Han isn't a pure Korean. The Oriental and African-American mix makes his face interesting to watch. The room is full of stuffed animals, bouncy balls, and smiley balloons. An elaborate train set is laid out on the floor. With his left hand, Han stacks up several coins on the table and puts a sizable black cup over them while Gee is busy playing with his Lego blocks. Assuming a teacher's tone, Han calls for Wonderboy's attention and asks,

"Gee, what is hidden under this cup?"

Gee turns around and looks up, hardly intrigued. Blinking his big eyes, he pauses for a moment to take a guess, puts his index finger in his mouth, and answers,

"Cute ladybug?"

Wonderboy is in a playful mood. On noticing a dirty look on Han's face, he quickly changes his answer.

"Froggy?"

Han's mouth is skewed at the corner. He lifts the cup to show the stacked-up coins and puts the cup back over the money.

"Should I always explain why palm trees are called palm trees? We did this before. They are coins, okay?"

Still holding the Lego blocks of an odd airplane shape in his hands, Gee obediently responds,

"Okay. Coing? Hmm. Coing, coing, coing."

Gee seems like the sound of the word. Rocking his upper body, he repeats it some more. Han snaps at Gee's musing and demands,

"Cut it out and listen!"

Gee is soon distracted by a small bright yellow circle of light moving on the ceiling. The late afternoon sunlight is reflected off Han's watch. With his mouth hanging open, Gee's eyes keep following the circle with delight. He grins and stretches out his hand to catch it.

"That pretty!"

Han seems to be fed up with Gee's short attention span. He puts his palm over the watch and scolds Gee mockingly,

"That's pretty. That's pretty. You worthless blockhead! You looked awful at the soccer game. Didn't I tell you to get rid of your ugly gut before the match?"

Immediately, Gee irrigates his big eyes with fat tears. Han continues to attack him like a tiny dog barking furiously at a grizzly bear. Gee's non-athletic body was a struggling point at the game but he surely deserves at least a pat on the back for his amazing goal. Gee casts his eyes to the floor and starts to chew on his fingers.

"I sorry. Me don' like exorcise. Sweat no fun."

"You smelly dumb bastard! Do you ever listen? Don't expect to get a lick of chocolate this week!"

Despite Gee's desperate plea, the half black man coldly stands up to leave and slams the door on Gee. Shortly after, the fat man stops crying, puts his Lego blocks aside, looks up at the ceiling, and searches for the same bright yellow circle. In contrast to what I know about Gee's private life, the baby in a man's body is a superstar in Korea, if not a superhero. Not much is known about the miracle maker. Gee strictly avoids publicity. The lack of the public knowledge has only amplified Wonderboy's popularity.

I can sense that Sunny seems strangely uneasy whenever the topic of Wonderboy comes up. He smiles, but without the usual wrinkles around his eyes.

Falls Church, Virginia, USA

Untamable curiosity, my biggest weakness, has led me into not a few unpleasant and even life-threatening situations. At the same time, several fascinating discoveries have been made. I'd like to share the one that really stands out. Let me rewind time a little bit. At a small local bar, mysterious gossip was whispered about a dead young woman who reappeared 33 years later. No one seemed to be able to confirm the actual cause of her death or to explain the resurrection. The bartender was doing a great job of coaxing his customers to spill more facts about the mystery. I thought he could make a decent journalist. Several different versions of the story were entertained, some overly exaggerated. For example, one account had it that she was in fact a sly ancient fox with nine tails, which shifted its shape into human form by putting on a skull. Another version explained it away as an alien abduction case. Amused by the conjecture, one customer smirked and shouted,

"I knew a chap. What was his name? Anyway, he found this tiny strange thingy implanted at the foot of his skull when he woke up in his cornfield. I bet she has one of those on the back of her neck!"

Without taking his eyes off of the baseball game on TV, another customer chimed in,

"God knows what those space animals did to her body. My ten bucks says she was knocked up with a star child, yeah, with creepy rat eyes!"

To the bartender's satisfaction, one foggy night a mildly drunken customer, allegedly the uncle of the resurrected woman, finally put flesh on the skeletal rumor. I was lucky to be there to eavesdrop on his story. According to him, three decades ago his niece fell down during a rock climb, was reported to be missing, and presumed to be dead. He called her 'Sweet Ocean' in his smudged speech. One day, she reappeared to her father out of thin air. At first, he thought that his daughter was a ghost. She looked just like his daughter 33 years ago – in the same clothing and with no sign of aging. The barman, all ears, declared that drinks were on the house and encouraged the uncle to continue. The customer recounted that his niece acted as if she was just woken up from a long sleep, remembering almost everything up to the unfortunate incident but nothing afterward. From what I could gather at the bar, the lady's story was marinated in mysteries, with more questions than answers. It called for an in-depth investigation.

The drunken customer eventually led me to the mysterious woman. Despite the long time that had elapsed, her school records, the related newspapers, and the police report were easy to find. The description of the event was rather sketchy, and some of the important details were missing. The police document briefly mentioned that there was another individual on the mountain but nothing more than that. A local newspaper described how search teams were organized to find her but were unsuccessful.

Luckily, my company showed an interest in the story and gave me the go-ahead. I carried out background checks on her parent and the relatives, which turned out to be useless. Getting nowhere fast, I arranged an initial interview with the resurrected person.

When the woman introduced herself, she insisted that the first 'a' in her name, Oceana, should be unpronounced: Ocean, ah! That way she could keep the ocean close to her heart, she was poetically convinced. Oceana's father, looking more like her grandfather than anything else, wanted to join the interview. His daughter's story must have been reiterated a thousand times, but the old man looked as interested as if he had heard it for the first time. Before the interview he called me aside and warned me not to mention spider or snake to his daughter. Even the words scared her, he said with parental concern. I made a mental note. No spider and no snake. Check! Few people are fond of those poisonous creeping creatures. I automatically wondered if scorpions were off-limits as well. Check!

At the interview, Oceana's fingers were busy wrestling with one another, though the whole interview seemed to thrill her. She began her story with the mountain climbing. She remembered that some pictures were taken there. While she rummaged through old memories, she wrinkled her forehead. She believed that she had lost her footing and slipped off a cliff. Her father looked perturbed. Oceana described how terrified she felt when she was falling, about to plunge into the rushing brown river. Her friend's hysterical voice calling her name from the cliff top echoed down the narrow valley, she added. The anticipation of the impact was dreadful. Oceana was quick to mention that she couldn't even scream because terror gripped her throat.

I could easily tell that she wasn't a great liar. Obviously she was making up some parts of her story. It isn't uncommon for interviewees to exaggerate, particularly when a tape recorder is rolling in front of them and someone is studiously making a note of their accounts. As a reporter I have trained myself to notice small unconscious gestures, micro-expressions. When people lie, their body movements are cut to the bare minimum to dedicate their full brain power in making up believable stories. Moreover, the change of the tone of voice and the shunning of eye contact are pretty reliable clues.

The very next thing Oceana remembered was the big purple door of her own house. It was a dog's loud barking sound from her house that must have woken her up, she realized. Parching thirst and a severe headache instantly struck her. It took a while for her to get oriented, she recalled. That was all she could withdraw from her memory bank.

Once awake, Oceana was surprised to discover that her voice was thick with the Queen's English, heavy with Victorian style. She called it awfully curious. Exactly what happened between the falling down and the waking up remained a mystery. I was mystified as to how she was beamed down from her past or maybe from the world of the dead. Oceana couldn't answer most of my questions and rehearsed her story as if she herself was a third person narrating an ancient tale. Her account was loaded with speculations and assumptions. Disappointingly, my research didn't go anywhere and more interviews with Oceana contributed very little. There was a chance that her lost memories would come back someday. Nonetheless, I didn't pin my hopes on it, knowing well that memory is the most whimsical creature under the sun, not to be relied upon.

Over the course of the interviews with Oceana I learned that she had a very close friend called Choy. In fact, it was the same person briefly mentioned in the old police statement, who was with Oceana at the mountain on the day of her disappearance. As far as my investigation on Oceana is concerned, Choy turns out to be even more intriguing than the resurrected woman. Oceana's friend has remained in Virginia for the last three decades and was incidentally out of town for weeks when Oceana reappeared. Today she is supposed to return from a long trip to China. Oceana is impatiently waiting for her in front of Choy's deluxe mansion. A taxi drives in and a middle-aged Asian lady rushes out of the car. As soon as the eyes of these women meet, they run to each other, hug, and do not let go. The reunion is heart-stopping. Imagine 33 years of separation! A reunion of a mother and her long lost daughter couldn't have been more moving. Their crying soon turns into wailing. Oceana's father sheds tears of his own. People know well that Choy suffered severe depression after losing Oceana, her best and only friend. That fact makes the day even more dramatic and emotional. Trying to cause minimum interruption, I photograph the occasion with journalistic professionalism. These two women start to speak in Choy's language. The click from my camera makes me feel a bit impolite. Through the viewfinder I see Oceana and then her friend. There is something vaguely familiar about Choy. I have definitely seen her somewhere before but my memory fails me. My mind is busy calculating the next moves to find out more about Oceana's friend.

Choy, seemingly skeptical and pessimistic about everything, looks like she once was attractive enough to break the hearts of a thousand men. She is in her early 50's with streaks of gray hair and furrows of wrinkles. It doesn't take a doctoral degree in psychology to see that her life has been bitter. When around her, it is like being at the worst job interview. Her cold eyes are loaded with permanent disapproval. It probably has to do with her clothing. I come to notice that all her dresses are either black or dark gray, suitable for a witch from a far once-upon-a-time land. According to Oceana, Choy's Chinese mother, deceased now, married an American ambassador back in her home country. Nevertheless, I can't see much of the American side in Choy's look or mannerisms. Wanting her daughter to grow up Chinese, her mother never spoke English to her. No language but Choy's mother tongue was allowed around her. Her mother taught her Eastern values partly through ancient proverbs but mostly through her character and life stories. Several years after Oceana's disappearance, Choy supposedly inherited a fortune from a Chinese relative, genealogically close but emotionally distant. She was given more than enough to support herself for the rest of her life. Her luxurious lifestyle and exotic house speak for themselves. Nonetheless, it is never clear what she is doing with her spare time.

People rarely visited Choy after Oceana's fall. Her social interaction wasn't very different before the tragic incident. Oceana was the only companion she had. It isn't just her depression that kept her distant from others. Apart from Oceana, the Chinese woman didn't know anyone who was fluent in her language. It is not the case, however, that Choy has totally cocooned herself from the rest of the world. She has kept herself up-to-date through every kind of magazine and newspaper. Some of the periodicals she has collected are so specialized that I even didn't know they ever

existed. There is, for example, a monthly magazine called *The Ignorable* which publishes notes, letters, and pictures found on streets, subways, public corridors, abandoned buildings, and so forth. These items tell fragments of stories with too little information to trace their origins but enough detail to tickle the imagination. Choy is especially obsessed with collecting unusual stories, covering such topics as historical events, top news, famous people, popular places, strange phenomena, and conspiracies. She only compiles the pictures, not the text articles, in her scrapbooks. These pictures have her comments in Chinese words which are all Greek to me. Her house has several rooms with shelves of well-categorized photo scrapbooks. For instance, the pictures related to UFOs, aliens, and government secrets are kept in a dark room guarded by many stern locks. When you are in one of those rooms, you feel as though you are standing in a small top secret chamber. Unsettlingly, after the day of her reunion with Oceana, Choy started to collect pictures related to me and my work. Whatever her intention may have been, instead of feeling honored, I felt as anxious as a Chihuahua dog on a treetop. I have yet to find out the reason behind it. Choy has put off interviews with me several times. Instinct tells me that she is hiding something. In fact, I can sense her uneasiness when I am around. Maybe she isn't sure how to treat a man in a wheelchair.

New York, New York, USA

I get easily exhausted from the complexity of the lives I spy on. The cluster of people that I'm onto is rather peculiar. They are like kids thrown into the Black Forest, striving to stay alive. It's amazing to witness how far the survival instinct can push us. Against my judgment, I find myself riding the emotional roller coasters of these individuals. Feelings are the last brutes to be domesticated. Sometimes I feel like a priest who bears the weighty burden of dark confessions.

Today, I am going to have a meeting with a guy who is supposed to have telepathic power. With his address on my lap, I'm pushing my wheelchair down this busy street. People eye me briefly and walk on as if I didn't exist. I bet it won't take half an hour before I escape from these pedestrians' memories. An introduction is in order, isn't it? I am Zroc, 31 years old, a perfectly average guy. I look so typical that I easily blend into the background. Of course, the wheelchair diverts attention as well. If asked, most of the time people would depict me as a thin blond white man with blue eyes. In fact, my physique leans toward chubby, and the eyes behind my glasses are hazel. The technical term for my hair is short straight brown strands. Sometimes, even I forget my appearance. So it is no shock if someone describes me as undecipherable. There is nothing to decipher. It is hard to judge whether I'm full of many contradicting personalities or lack any defining ones. My average appearance has been useful when dealing with the various individuals that I meet in the line of my work. Mistaking my featureless exterior for a non-judgmental character, people are often ready to share unspeakably personal secrets with me.

I'm finally in front of a small apartment building. Unexpectedly, from outside it looks pretty rundown. Until now, I have explored only the inside of the building. The music blasting from the second floor rocks the whole block. The doorbell is too high for me to reach. By the state of the place, it wouldn't surprise me if the bell hasn't rung for years. I double-check my voice recorder and notebook. The alley is a bit too shady for someone on their own. I concentrate hard and send the guy a mental message. Ding! The telepathic sentence is sent, but there is no response. I call the guy's name over the screaming music. Still no answer. The man finally notices me when I reach out to him using my superpower, the cell phone. Soon, the main door is opened and the mind talker steps out with a surgical mask over his mouth. Judging from his hooked nose and angular jaw, he must be an Indian. I know there is no elevator in the apartment building but I ask about it anyway. The Indian guy shakes his head and suggests having our meeting at a nearby playground. As usual, his face is paper-pale as if it has never seen the sun. We both know that it is out of the question for him to carry me up to the 5th floor. He hands me a newspaper and a water bottle, leans forward, and slowly pushes my chair. I can tell many things about a person from the way they drive my wheelchair. According to my chair-psychoanalysis, the Indian man must be over-caring and easily intimidated. Most of the time, people are not willing to give away facts about themselves, especially to a stranger with a recorder. So I have developed several methods for collecting hidden knowledge.

In my career, information is far and away the best friend. What is my profession? I am a reporter currently working for *Untold*, a magazine favored by curious minds for its skill at digging out believe-it-or-not stories. Surprisingly, it has not a few subscribers. Some of our readers from exotic countries have impossible names. Craving for oddities is universal, I suppose. It isn't as big as international news magazines like *Time* or *National Geographic*. Yet our subscribers are dedicated and enthusiastic about the topics covered by our magazine. To last as a reporter for a tiny company like *Untold*, you need to be a storyteller, a detective, sometimes a negotiator, certainly a spy, and above all a fighter. It's ironic that my strong skepticism toward the media's integrity turned me into a news chaser. You have to be dead dumb to miss the hocus-pocus in many news stories. I call the press an attention-mad dog. It will go to any lengths to get noticed. This canine barks menacingly at legitimate facts and slavers amorously over unproven hypotheses. Suppressing inconvenient truth under its muddy paws, it habitually regurgitates non-existent phenomena and wags its tail fanatically at scandals. I admit that there is no such a thing as a pure fact. A crucial part of the truth can be easily missed, the information carrier inevitably taints the facts with his own views, and the receiver is bound to have his own subjective interpretation. I always seek the real, or at least less contaminated, truth behind the synthetic news. There is no better way to do that than to become a news digger myself. The main goal in my investigations is to gather as much information as possible from various sources. That's the best way to steer clear of subjective conclusions and misleading interpretations. Mining core facts is as laborious as construction work. A seemingly simple story can easily turn into a long-term project. For instance, once I had to chase what appeared to be a mundane kidnapping story for months, running into countless dead ends. The more I dug into the case, the more puzzling it became,

with unexpected suspects, mystifying twists, and overturning surprises. All the trouble paid off when the mystery was finally solved. The real identity of the kidnapper shocked everyone. When the account of the missing girl was published, our readers enthusiastically sang the praises of its gripping storyline. My boss doesn't approve of my do-it-right-or-forget-it approach. He is the best friend of the devil, for lack of a better term. Deadlines and the number of subscribers are all he cares about. An incarnate annoyance, he should be the dictionary definition of 'a pain in the neck'. He is willing to publish any story if it is 'juicy' enough. Off the record, I must say that he is more like a businessman than a journalist. My fire-breathing boss isn't the only stumbling block on my career path. One time I had to do a follow-up story to amend the account in my article. It was a humbling experience. Basically, I was completely deceived by a couple of con artists. I learned the hard way to trust no one in the story loop.

The Indian guy wants me to call him Thow, although I know from my background research that his real name is Andy. While walking to the playground, Thow plays a reporter and asks me personal questions. Everything about him is socially awkward. I want him to know as little about me as possible. At my ultimate test of his telepathy, he shouldn't second-guess what I'm thinking. Exceptional free-association skills are often mistaken as telepathic power. So my answers are intentionally vague. I have been nosing around Thow for weeks and have gathered plenty of information about him, but nothing has been conclusive about his special talent.

The way I go about with my news hunting is straightforward. Before and after the interviews I carry out detective work. No matter how remotely it is related to the story, every stone has to be turned. Convincing rumors, conceivable tall tales, or believable lies always beckon with curved, luring fingers. I feel most helpless when I am out of leads. It's often necessary to plow through documents decades old. There is nothing more superb than a little clue that throws light upon the path to naked truth. At first, the interviewees with wild stories appreciate captive ears. Yet most of them are understandably shocked when presented with the facts I have managed to gather behind their backs. These matters are shamefully personal, sensually intimate, or uncomfortably sensitive. Confronting interviewees with their dark secrets can be a delicate job. On average, I follow up two or three stories in parallel, often more than I can handle. There is unlimited supply of odd tales. Everyone has at least one wild story up his sleeve, patiently waiting for liberal ears.

Thow and I finally reach the playground. A broken bicycle and a big blanket are partially buried on the ground. Something unidentifiable has been burned down and a faint string of smoke floats from its belly. A refrigerator lies on its side, its wide mouth gaping at the skewed monkey bars. Everything here looks as safe as the sun's breath. At least there is plenty of privacy for today's interview. Thow nudges his hand toward me and asks for his stuff. I notice that he is wearing thin plastic gloves. I give the newspaper and the water bottle back to him. He spreads the paper on a half-eaten bench and sits down. The bottle in Thow's hand has the distinctive Aquoq logo. So he knows something about me.

My latest article thoroughly exposed the deception of Aquoa, the biggest international mineral water company. Its dominance hadn't been challenged before. I'm sure the company had never imagined its almighty reign could be placed on the verge of collapse by an obscure magazine like ours. On its 50th anniversary, *Untold* popped the blister of Aquoa's dark past. Knowing the seriousness of the charges, I wanted to take more time to tie up loose ends in my investigation. But my humanity-deprived boss wouldn't hear of it. By the way, I hate the Hawaiian shirt he wears day after day, year after year. He claimed that the timing couldn't be better. I had to comply. My article got Aquoa's dirty secret out in the open. In its infancy, the company secretly put addictive substance into its products over 5 years and managed to hide the hideous information for decades. The amounts of the psycho-stimulant were small enough to hide serious effects but large enough to sway consumer preference. The compound was known to be cancerous if taken in large amounts. In the publication, I revealed the name of the chemical and the exact amount introduced to each water bottle. It was also reported that Aquoa used illegal means to guard the top company secret for years. Certain officials were bribed and several employees were silenced in violent ways. The accuracy of the information must have disturbed the giant company. Aquoa has such international control over drinking water that my article has been quoted by major news all around the globe since its publication. Our magazine's name was carried with the news and enjoyed its burst of fame for a week. People were outraged by the company's foul play. Aquoa's spokesman kept silent and refused to respond to our accusations. At a time like that, I was engulfed by the power of truth.

Thow and I get on with our interview. He looks as frail as a jellyfish out of water. I get my recorder rolling. The device should pick up Thow's voice even though it is muffled by his white mask. I am worried, nevertheless. He asks me how I have found him. I lie and tell him that an anonymous reader of our magazine tipped us about him. He looks confounded. Truth be told, I accidentally discovered him on a hospital surgery table. Thow assures me that he can't read my mind unless I telepathically send him a message. That's good to know because I need to tell him a truckful of lies. Thow divulges particulars about himself that I already know. I pretend otherwise. He shouldn't feel offended by the personal information I have on him, not just yet. I know as a fact that the Indian man wouldn't have let me enter his place even if I could walk. For his own safety, no one is allowed in his holy sanctuary. Thow is another loner not by choice but for other reasons.

The extent of the information that I can gather by spying on others is enormous. This has been my big experiment, and I call these people my subjects. Shadowing others isn't always as exciting as it first appears to be. I often have to risk my career and compromise ethical values. That's not the worst part. In general, people's lives are repetitious, uneventful, and downright boring. It requires the patience of a snail crossing a bridge. It is simply a miracle that my mind hasn't gone disco as my grandpa put it. I can definitely relate to the stars as they watch people night in and night out. Some of the things I've witnessed are so shocking that I have determined

to lock them up in my brain and take them to my grave. We all know the types of the things we do when we are alone. Admitting them is one thing, but watching others doing them is a whole new ball game. Take it from me. That's how the bubble bursts. There is an ancient saying that one's true integrity is measured by how he conducts himself when unwatched. It strikes the core of the truth and sheds light on whether we are intrinsically good or not. Once you discover someone's behavior in the dark, you get easily attached to them. It is because you end up leaving yourself wide open to the intimate and vulnerable side of another soul. For the same reason, you feel much closer to your friend when he confides a deep secret to you. A strong bond immediately forms between you two, and you become a part of the secret.

Thow confesses that in his entire life he has met only two boys who could pick up his silent signals and one girl who could mentally transmit words. I guess it works like radio frequencies. Thow's face suddenly darkens. He simply says that those kids are no more but he won't elaborate. I am not happy when people tease me with a semi-naked fact. Nonetheless, my facial expression doesn't show it. I remind myself once again that Thow can't read my mind. What his statement entails is that it is very unlikely that he can prove his superpower to me today or ever. Thow coughs. I ask him to try me anyway. He pauses for a second and utters 'There'. Nothing happens. I ask Thow to try again and request him to speak slowly this time. He laughs and sneezes. I insist that it has to be the same message. Thow slowly articulates 'There'. I mimic "You've got mail!" and wink. Thow laughs again. At that very moment, a crisp image of dark thick lips flashes in my mind. They definitely belong to a black person. When I am at the point of telling him what I just saw in my head, Thow puts his gloved index finger over his masked lips. I don't get it. He warns me not to talk about it to another soul if I want to live. Heaven knows I intend to live longer than a mountain. Thow cautions me that I shouldn't even think the image so loudly. I quickly scale down the image in my brain. Thow soon changes the topic and asks about my irresponsive legs.

I was born with them this way. Or, at least that is what I was told by my grandpa, Martin, a hot tempered farmer. Despite all his sacrifices to raise me by himself, I used to hold a grudge against him, specifically against his sudden death. As a just-fledged young adult, I didn't know how to cope with the death of my only family. No one should go through that type of shock. Although I thought like a boy, I knew that much. One windy morning, Martin was found stiff and cold on his bed. A chronic breathing problem had bothered him for years and it appeared that the sucker finally got him. He always kept his window open for fresh air. On that terrible morning I noticed in his room an empty plastic bag dragged over the floor by wind, capturing the exact image of Martin's lifeless body. After that morning, for several months, whenever I saw a vinyl bag dancing in the air, the traumatic feelings I had on that day shook me all over again. The saddest part of the whole thing is that we had another argument about my parents the night before his death. Shaking with anger, I raised my voice to him that night. I never got a chance to say sorry. The dreadful morning is something I have struggled to come to terms with. It was beyond me how Martin could breathe his last knowing that his disabled grandson would be left all

alone in the unkind world. During my adolescence I considered him to be a stubborn old fool, handing down his unwanted temper to me. Later I realized that he had actually created a strong person out of a wimp. I miss him terribly. As time goes by, I appreciate his jokes much more. It used to be irritating to hear the same jokes a thousand times. His rusty memory was guilty as charged. Martin would call anyone he disliked a communist. That annoyed me too. As I grow old, I often see him in myself. For all I know, he raised me all alone. I used to be upset with him because he refused to tell me anything about my parents. He simply said some things were best left unknown. One day while Martin was out harvesting, I dragged myself through the whole house, searching everywhere. But not a single photo or letter of my parents' was found. The only unusual things I stumbled upon were a TV set completely covered with dust and a piece of paper in a wooden box. If I remember correctly, the paper, yellow with age, was an official certificate of some description. Curiously, the document had the name 'Fave' on it. I couldn't help but wonder whether my disability had something to do with my parents' absence. The mystery remains until this day. I am not sure what the toughest part of my childhood was: being parentless, being disabled, or being surrounded by ever-multiplying commies. I never shared this with anyone else, but I have a vague memory that I used to be able to walk and run just like other boys. I have no idea how I have deposited this piece of knowledge at the base of my skull. It may be one of those childhood fantasies that just don't fade easily. Due to my disability, I spent most of my childhood at home reading books and newspapers. It got me addicted to all flavors of stories, histories, and facts. My grandpa, a firm believer of a TV-free life, called TV a heap of dung full of maggots. Our only window on the world was a faceless old radio. Movies and television shows never interested me even after I became an independent adult. To this day, I never expanded my horizon wide enough to own the idiot box. Instead, I turn to the radio for daily news. Probably the anti-TV syndrome runs in my family. It always drives me up the wall when I am stopped in the middle of a story and unable to find out how it ends. Similarly, the worst thing that can happen to a bookworm like me is to see an author pass away without finishing his book series. This tale-addiction eventually got me involved in journalism where I get paid to put my nose where it doesn't belong. I guess I have a little wicked gossip in me. To find fresh news-worthy stories, I spend a great deal of time eavesdropping at places where big mouths thrive such as bars, restaurants, and hair salons. Swimming pools are wonderful places to discover subjects.

I stay stingy with my personal information and still don't bear my heart to Thow. Our interview has to be cut short because Thow's coughing fit is out of control. Unfortunately, I don't get to dredge up enough private secrets to give him the shock of his life. Before Thow disappears into his building, he warns me once again about the secret I received from him at the playground. That is the last I saw of Thow. Who could have known that he would kill himself today?

San Diego, California, USA

A guy with the rough physique of a football lineman is busy cleaning up a big bird cage. Freckles on his cheeks give him a boyish look. His name tag states that he is called Tom. He is a father of 7 children, ages ranging from 14 years to 22 months. Among them, two girls are as identical as tadpoles in a pond. As someone who didn't know how to make babies on his wedding night, Tom has done an impressive job of being fruitful, multiplying, and replenishing the earth. His colleague, Simon, joins him with the cleaning. Tom grins at him. Smiles never seem to leave his lips and his chuckle is deadly contagious. For the first time Simon spots Tom's dark beauty mark which is usually hidden under his lower lip. Tom doesn't look straight at Simon's eyes. His attention is always spared like a drop of water during desert travel. Most of the time, he keeps his head down as if deep in thought and looks up briefly only when necessary. Simon has known Tom for less than a month but feels as if he has been his buddy from teething years. While these two guys are scrubbing and scraping, a friend of Tom's is talking about him at a baseball game.

"Do you see player number 7 over there? That guy reminds me of my buddy, Tom. His family is something else! When I visit his place I feel as though I am on a totally foreign planet."

At that very moment in a hair salon, a gossipy neighbor is speaking to her hairdresser reflected on the mirror.

"You know Tom, house number 7? That's right, the zoo guy. It was through his family that I learned the true meaning of the word 'welcome'. I have to be very careful how I behave around them, though. They are all helplessly innocent. I just can't get enough of them. They are weird but addictively nice."

The deep peace and substantial joy at Tom's house keep people talking about his family, a space shielded from the vicious and vulgar world. The alien feeling would stay warm in their minds like the stains at the bottoms of teacups. As a matter of fact, back in the bird cage, Simon is brewing a plan to visit Tom's family on the coming Saturday. What Simon doesn't know is that the family has been keeping a secret from him, in fact from almost everyone, especially the government. Simon is fond of walking into Tom's house without prior notice. And that's the way Tom wants it. At first, people find it impolite to barge in. Once they get used to it and have taken a liking to it, they can't go back to the artificial social custom. Formality kills intimacy. Simon nudges a question while raking the dirty floor.

"Would you mind lending me a hand with my car? She is throwing tantrums again."

"Sure. I'm all yours."

"Where do you find all the spare time when you have 6 kids. Or is it 8?"

Tom slowly answers with a big shy grin,

"I live in an eternal time zone."

No further elaboration is given. Being a man of few words, that is how Tom airs his thoughts to others. Probably five small books could hold everything that he has squeezed out of his vocal cords in his entire life. When those few words left his mouth, they did so unhurriedly and tentatively. Time seems to tick at a half pace around him. The world-famous San Diego Zoo is where Tom earns his keep. Some

don't see much charm in taking care of the trapped stinking animals. The job doesn't pay much either. Naturally, all his children have to learn the virtue of saving, sharing and sparing from an early age. Tom is, however, ever proud to work at the man-made animal kingdom. The bird cage cleaning is done, and Tom moves on to the fox's den while Simon sets out toward the snake cages. While feeding a baby fox, Tom casually exclaims to a zoo visitor who is curious about his presence in the confined space with the wild critter,

"Animals are wondrous!"

By which he means, "There is no place like a zoo, where people can be touched by the amazing work of God's hand on a daily basis!" But again, his sentence comes much shorter than when it was formed in his head. The voices of excited children and the fingers pointed at awesome creatures are something Tom never can take for granted.

After work, Tom drops by a secondhand bookstore to buy a birthday gift for one of his kids. As he approaches the religion section, his palms get sweaty. Disappointingly but not unexpectedly, the shop carries no religious books for kids other than the ones published by Circlian.

The topic of raising godly children is Tom's keen interest. After long hours of work, he goes over what the kids have learned at school. Originally he wanted to home-school his children but circumstances turned their back to that particular wish. Instead of jamming his kids' brains with disconnected facts, Tom tries to make learning fun while encouraging the children to think for themselves. Besides daily family worship in the basement, he carries out a Bible study for each family member at night. Spurring his tired body, Tom copies down Holy Scripture from his memory while everyone is in bed. Before drifting away to dreamland, he whispers a prayer that his kids will live in a free country someday, if his Lord wills. As far as Tom is concerned, TV is Satan's best weapon for corroding souls, particularly young malleable ones. People are always puzzled as to how Tom's family has survived without a television set. What they do know is that the family has a knack for finding other ways to entertain themselves. For example, they are active members of several sports clubs. The church summer camp in a cave and the annual berry picking are things they never miss. They might be able to get by without bread and butter, but not without books. Tom's kids learn to read before they reach four. Being such bookworms, they don't give library books a chance to gather dust. You can easily picture them reading far into the night to find out what happened to the delicate princess evangelizing cannibals in Africa, or whether the pastor's son ever escaped from the island full of monsters with poor dental care. Tom's conversation with his infant baby starts long before the first word is spoken. You might well think that Tom was going a bit too far if you ever saw him talking to his wife's womb.

"Daddy loves ya! Soon, I'm gonna pinch your cute cheeks."

Putting his ears close to his wife's ballooned tummy, Tom would roll his eyes from side to side to catch sounds.

"Did you hear that, Aio? I think it just said Dada!"

His philosophy of education tends to lean more on nurture than on nature. As if to prove his point, all his kids think very maturely for their ages. If you ever talk to

them, you will feel as though you were talking to grownups. At times their advanced reasoning skills and big vocabularies will catch you off guard. A seven-year-old boy, Vion is especially outstanding among Tom's children. His eyes are so bright that they seem to look right at the deepest part of you. They are so clear that you feel a spell of vertigo if you look down at them too long. Vion loves to use philosophical phrases. Spelling words in the middle of his sentences is a fun game for him. His first spoken word was 'why' and it stuck with him. Why is the sky blue? How come ice is cold? Do plants have feelings? Because? And then? What for? Every answer to his question only gives birth to more questions. For him, the universe teems with fantastic puzzles and marvelous riddles. Even Tom, who is passionately against favoritism, couldn't miss the boy's uniqueness. Aio and Vion have a noticeably strong bond that surpasses even that of Tom's twin girls. People cherish heartwarming memories from childhood. For Vion, it has to be the conversation between his parents which he overheard on the way to the bathroom one night. He couldn't tell what they were discussing. Their dialog flowed as seamlessly as that of a person talking to himself. There was a deep peace about the way they conversed in slow, low voices. One evening, Vion walked up to his parents as silently as the daylight at the crack of morning. Holding his favorite small blanket, he exclaimed,

"This brother of your daughter is convinced that the strong affection between you ensures the emotional stability of your o-f-f-s-p-r-i-n-g, Selah!"

Vion put all the punctuation marks with his small fingers, starting from an open double quotation mark with his right hand, a comma, the final exclamation mark, never forgetting to close his sentence with a double-fingered quotation mark with his left hand. Before anyone noticed, he walked away as noiselessly as a cat.

Tom checks out another bookstore, but there is nothing satisfactory. His favorite bookstore was shut down for carrying illegal literature which Tom used to trade under the counter. At the third bookshop, he finally finds a book on the ancient Hebrew culture and silently thanks his Lord for the discovery. His next stop is a farmers' market. His fingers carefully pick fresh strawberries one by one. His wife will love them. Just imagining her smile makes Tom thrilled.

It will take a thousand nights to enumerate the things that make Tom and his family a shining singularity. Tom's romance deserves to be told on the first night. For Tom, every day is part of his honeymoon. Tom easily loses his train of thought at the sight of his wife. They kiss anywhere: on the crowded street, after a church service, beside the interstate, in a room full of candles, at a hectic shopping mall, in front of clueless zoo animals, and on a moonlit rooftop. At times Tom wakes up in the middle of the night and watches sleeping Aio the way a jewelry collector savors his favorite gem. It's Tom's secret hobby to put tiny love notes in various places, for example, in Aio's pocket, in his empty lunchbox, under a plate, and so on. Aio once found one taped under her shoe, which said, "Doll, hasten every step, back to your hubby panting for your kisses." Tom can never stop thanking his Lord for his love. Pleasing his wife pleases Tom. It doesn't bother him that Aio just takes and takes and doesn't let out her emotions, even to her husband.

A lot about Tom and Aio can be explained by how their relationship budded at their high school. Tom was picked on daily at school for being old-fashioned and gullible in every way. Aio had pity on him for being too naïve. Somehow sympathy grew into curiosity which soon turned into attraction. Even then, she had a good head for hiding her feelings. Aio, a self-proclaimed wild spirit, tried to shake up Hades to see what would crawl out. Rumors about her took Tom's mind by surprise like an enemy's attack at dawn. He realized that he had been shielded from the ugly world. For Tom, everything that Aio had committed was unimaginable. Her daring spirit was something he had never possessed. Tom was filled with envy that became animal magnetism. Doesn't every attraction spring up when we see in others what we lack? The attraction turns into an obsession if that 'what' is something that never can be ours. Tom knew he shouldn't care about those worldly things, but he often found himself wanting to know more about Aio's feats. He prayed fervently not to think about them, but while praying, he found himself imagining wilder things. In his daydreams, Aio's hair kept beckoning him with a million fingers. It was as strikingly black as a crow. Tom piously shifted his attention to her spiritually dead soul. His calling was never clearer. Risking many lives, he invited her to his church, but Aio gave him an Antarctic shoulder. Discouraged by nothing, Tom managed to sneak Matthew's Gospel into her locker. It is anyone's guess as to what happened to the booklet in Tom's handwriting. At least Aio didn't report him. Tom asked her out to a disguised Christian concert. As expected, she handed him a ready-made no. One day, Tom's patience finally paid off when Aio winked at him in the school corridor. It was brief but Tom was sure of it. All day he played the wink in slow motion a thousand times over: the head slightly tilted, the thin lips curled seductively, a slight rise of the right eyebrow, and the left blue eye teasingly vanishing behind the long thick curvy lashes. Aio played with Tom's mind and knew all the tricks of the trade. As soon as she drew him closer, she pushed him away. Tom's mind spiraled up the mountain of confusion. Aio didn't understand herself either. Why was she so cruel to Tom when in fact she really enjoyed his attention? The more Aio refused Tom, the more he was drawn to her. Eventually, his long-suffering love saw victory. Before long, they had their first kiss under the biggest oak tree in town. A hopeless romantic, Tom couldn't stop thinking about Aio. Without her, every waking moment was torture for him. So they said "I do!" in front of everybody and their Lord at high school graduation.

Upon arriving home with the used book and the strawberries wrapped in excitement, Tom finds his children crying and the house in chaos. Vion looks most distraught. Tom's aunt, Martha is trying to calm the children. One of the older kids called her. Tom sets the bags aside, kneels down, and starts to pray. Aio ran away again.

2

AND IT SHALL COME TO PASS

If caught, it's not panic but excessive reasoning that will kill you.

I visited Whud, the amazing poker player. I had to. Although I had a professional interest in untying the mysteries surrounding the bird man, it was in fact his artwork that drew me to his house time and again. Whud painted on and off. At times it took him months to finish a piece. There was one particular painting that was simply divine. It was abstract, with rousing colors and provocative figures. When I stood in front of the painting for the first time, I felt totally exposed like a fortress with broken walls. The artwork, seemingly alive with dim pulses and still breaths, penetrated every fraction of me and touched the part in me that was once unreachable. The striking first impression lingered like a deep scar. As far as I could tell, the piece of art depicted life and death without the use of stereotypical symbols. Multiple dimensions of seemingly unrelated shapes were somehow harmoniously laid out on flat paper. Ironically, a big empty space at the upper corner seemed to define its central character. As a whole, the piece of work insisted on its own persona, freely defying all conventional styles and creatively breaking every norm. The harder I try to relay my impression of the painting, the more frustrated I get from not being able to describe it adequately. You just have to see it for yourself to appreciate its profound peculiarity. Our language is a drooling infant when it comes to articulating emotions and beliefs. The artwork had such a powerful grip on me that I had to make a regular visit to study it from various angles and distances. I platonically love you ever so much! Oddly enough, every time I laid my eyes on it, the painting seemed to have changed. Most likely, it was my mind that had grown to be able to interpret the same piece from a new perspective.

It was a typical English spring day when I made a visit to Whud. He was leisurely mopping his floor. Cleaning seemed to render him a certain pleasure and possibly good mental health as well. Staying cautious, I slowly breathed in through my nose and gently breathed out through my mouth. Occasionally snoring, Susie was taking her regular nap. I heard once that we have a significant drop in body temperature and vigilance at midday. It's smaller in scale than at night but big enough to cast the spell of a post-lunch dip. Whud paused to take a break, stretched his back, and cast his affectionate gaze over Susie. Shortly he resumed cleaning. Everything about Whud was soft. His face looked gentle, harmless, and calm. A person's face says a lot about

his personality. In particular, the eyes mirror the person's honesty. Whud's gaze was full of kindness and tenderness, ready to embrace every ugliness and impurity. I have also noticed that people with loud voices tend to be frank whereas soft-voiced folks are more likely to be infested with secrets. That was one of many convenient, probably scientifically ungrounded, prejudices that I had formulated while dealing with all sorts of people through my line of work.

Seen from inside, Whud's log house was cozy and bright. It was almost empty with one bedroom/kitchen and a tiny bathroom. There was an old recliner at the center of the room. From the look of it, the chair must have been manufactured around the late Jurassic Period. A narrow bed on the south side selfishly soaked up the sunlight through the window. A small lonely table occupied the best part of the kitchen area. You could easily learn Whud's simple diet by looking at the stack of dried and canned food next to the kitchen sink. There were no bookshelves, no pictures, certainly no telephone, no radio, no television, and no nothing. The place reminded me of a small Paris museum of a little-known artist with few visitors. Whud had a mirror in his bathroom, but I rarely saw him use it. Surrounded by tall trees and small hills, the building was not easily spotted. Even if you somehow found the house, you would face weathered walls plastered with graffiti. In contrast to its spotless interior, the outside of the log house looked forsaken and had the appearance of a haunted cottage in a horror movie.

Whud's life was even more boring than his simpleminded house. Most of his days were spent either in the recliner or in a dream world. He owned only one book, an old Christian Bible. I had not thought that the Holy Book in its entirety had ever survived. Whud cherished it like a treasure and often tenderly caressed the Scriptures with his fingers. As far as I could remember, he never opened the book. Only his nose deeply appreciated the scent of its aged paper. The reclusive man rarely used lights at night and stayed inside most of the time. Naturally, it was impossible to know if he was still alive unless you saw him moving about in the building. I couldn't help but wonder what was going on in his head. He could have been a wonderful plant. Even the life of a dog seems to be more interesting than his. His mother must have not taught him that sloth is one of the seven deadly sins.

Whud made every effort to keep himself far from other souls. I could never figure out what kind of ugly past he was running from. It could be a bad relationship, a hideous crime, a heavy debt, or an unbearable truth. To me, Whud was mostly an unknown quantity. Soldiers during a war or fugitives from justice are reputed for being addicted gamblers. That probably explains Whud's love-hate relationship with poker. Nonetheless, it was apparent that Whud never could reconcile himself to a life with no human touch. Just like the rest of us, his soul was not an island. Whud's only social life was brief meetings with a black guy in his late 20's. Because of his small stature, the young man looked like a boy except for his mature eyes. Those black eyes didn't say much about their owner. Whud used him for basic groceries, the rare mail delivery, and miscellaneous errands to the town. The black man didn't seem to mind doing these chores for handsome cash. Throughout history, money has made many unthinkable things possible. The young man also arranged a taxi for Whud when he needed to play poker. The guy visited only on the second Tuesday of each

month. On the agreed day, his shabby car would trudge up the unpaved road toward Whud's lonely log house around midday, sometimes in the evening, but never in the morning. That was the only irregularity about his visit. The black guy kept his stay as brief as possible and kept interaction with Whud to a bare minimum as if the middle-aged man carried a deadly plague. No greetings were exchanged and no eye contact was attempted. A drug dealer could have been less indifferent and impersonal. I don't know how their symbiosis was hatched. One thing was certain. They needed each other just as stock markets and greedy minds can't decouple themselves from each other. On the other hand, the young man was bluntly friendly with Susie and always took time to talk to her. There were the times when the errand guy didn't show up for some reason. One winter, for example, a couple of months were skipped in a row. The chap never bothered to explain or apologize. Every second Tuesday seemed to be the highlight of the month for Whud. He didn't seem to be able to stay put in his recliner like other days and would keep looking out his window. When the sky didn't have a favorable look, Whud got restless, possibly fearing that the bad weather might discourage the chap's visit. Whistling a merry tune, he often waited for the black chap at the porch. Around midday, after catching the sound of the old car's engine Susie would turn her head. She would hurry to the door, eager to greet the lad. In contrast, Whud would hastily walk into the log house. Shortly after, the guy's car would be spotted through the big trees. When the car got close to the building, the young lad honked to signal his arrival. Happy Susie welcomed the young chap without hiding a single morsel of joy. Her eyes stated how much she had longed to see him and that she wished he would visit her more often. Soon after, dragging his feet, Whud would slowly come out to meet the black man as if he wasn't expecting him that day. During one very rainy week, Susie got seriously ill. There was nothing Whud could do but wait for the errand man. From the look of it, Susie appeared to be at death's door. With his forehead wrinkled from worry, Whud waited for the young man at his porch every day even though the small man turning up on a day other than the one agreed was a fireball's chance in heaven. Fortunately, the errand guy came along on the preset Tuesday and Susie received proper medical attention in town. I was convinced that at least Whud would have a phone line installed in case of an emergency like that, but he never changed his withdrawn lifestyle despite this life-threatening ordeal. Apparently, there was something Whud could not compromise.

The spring cleaning day wasn't the special Tuesday, but for some reason Whud's mood seemed unusually upbeat. He found something under his bed and stared at it for minutes. I carefully walked up to him to see what captured his attention. His blue bird Pipi flew me by, landed on Whud's shoulder, and whistled. As I was admiring the close relationship between them, Whud suddenly put down the leathery object in his hands, looked up at me, and said,

"Dost thou get pleasure from watching over another's soul?"

Startled, I let out a neighing cry. Was it me or Pipi that he was talking to? Whud stretched his back and looked into my eyes. Words tumbled out of his mouth.

"Son, I'm addressing thee, yea, the curious visitor."

There was no accusation in his words. His therapeutic voice was very calm like the one citing a poem. I had no choice but to flee from his house in a heartbeat. When I came back to my place I was out of breath. It couldn't be real! Although Whud didn't say much, I had to do a lot of thinking about what he had said. It was the first time I had ever heard him speak full sentences. That was how reserved he was. His accent was another thing. The inflection was ragingly foreign to my ears. I had to exercise the full faculty of reasoning and stitch up his words in various combinations to figure them out. I knew that there were many different accents in Britain. But Whud's strong intonation sounded like a whole new language to me. A realization shook me hard. It meant that he had been aware of me all along. The thought made me shiver. It was like finding several large engorged leeches on my body after an hour of swimming in a river. If Whud knew my existence for all those years, what had kept him from revealing the fact? My grandpa told me that there are two sorts on the third rock: those who possess an ocean of long-suffering patience, and those who don't have a drop. I belong to the latter category and humbly envy the former. Whud must have a Pacific of patience. Previously, there were several occasions when my subjects acted as if they sensed my presence. All those cases, however, appeared to be coincidences or the result of my overly cautious imagination. How could Whud possibly know about me and my spying affair? I had been extra careful with him because he seemed to be extremely sensitive to subtle changes around him. For that reason, I made sporadic visits to quench my hunger for his painting and watch Quos waste his life, swatting flies with his tail. The whole experience destroyed my self-confidence. I tried to put the puzzle together but in vain. The more I thought about it, the less it made sense. A loud news announcement from the radio interrupted my scrambled thoughts. I realized that I had forgotten to turn it off before visiting Whud. To no one's surprise, another firefighter had committed suicide. In his dead hand, his favorite jackknife was found with blood smeared all over it. There was a big fire the night before his death, and the fireman had flown into the face of danger to save several souls. The newsman exclaimed that not everybody's life weighs the same and that the firefighter's life was worth all the people he had spared. However it was depicted, the self-murder was far from heroic. Many suspected that it might not have been the fireman himself who ended his stressful life. Mysterious corpses like his had been found not only at fire stations, but also at 24-hours convenience stores, police stations, airports, and tollbooths. Although the newscaster's voice was one octave higher than usual, my mind wandered. The jaws of Whud's revelation were still on my throat. My unique ability to gather information was at stake, not to mention my career. It seemed obvious that I had to quit sneaking around other souls. All that has its beginning must suffer its ending. Once I made the decision to abandon the spy business I felt liberated and even bold. Before I put a full stop to my old way of living, I needed to be convinced all the way. A faint voice in my head whispered that it could have been a simple misunderstanding. Having joined forces with courage, I visited Whud once more to quench my curiosity. When I put my feet on Whud's wooden floor again, the middle-aged man was sitting comfortably in his recliner. His bird Pipi on his shoulder was happily dozing off. Breathing slowly, I

carefully walked toward Whud. Not bothering to turn around to look at me, he said in his gentle voice,

“Thou art back. I have prayed ‘tis to be so.”

At his voice, Pipi woke up and fluttered its wings a couple of times. As if Whud knew that I was panicked and ready to leave, he spoke fast.

“By the way, how hast thou fooled Susie?”

There was no sniff of doubt any longer. Whud could and did detect my presence. With a heavy heart, I turned around and galloped away, barely catching him saying,

“Thou art rubble and skilled in no scent?”

That was how I made out what he uttered. It could have been “Thou are skilled, with no scent of rubbles?” or even “No skilled art has a terrible scent?” He talked like Moses in an odd accent. So any guess was a good guess. When did he start to be aware of me and how much did he know about me? I wished I could turn into a little boy and cry my head off.

Originally, I got to know about Whud from a random guy at a barbershop in Miami. The English businessman portrayed Whud as a phenomenal phenomenon to the barber. According to him, Whud was quite a quiet man with a tiny chicken on his shoulder. The young man claimed that he had once lost his much-attached semi-detached house to Whud. At first, the chap along with other players was convinced that Whud was a cheater. The Englishman mentioned that a pretty tall missy in particular turned red with raging rage. I wasn’t sure whether he meant she was very tall, or she was beautiful and tall. After scrutinizing every video for hours, other players found next to nothing suspicious about the old man or his blue bird. Looking more like a stuffed toy, the feathery creature in the tapes rarely moved or made any noise throughout the game. I often wondered how Whud had trained Pipi like that. Of course, there was no way the small bird could see the hands of other players. Even if the critter had seen anything, its little brain couldn’t have made out the complex symbols and patterns. Probably, it could handle only a handful of concepts like peck, poop, sleep, fly, mate, and poop a little more. Whud always insisted on having the lucky bird with him. Winning often being at the whim of chance, everyone let him have it his way. Soon, other players started to admire the reclusive man’s skill. From then on, the games with the birdman became something eagerly pursued with licking lips. Whud sometimes lost several pots, but he was always the last one to triumph. People tried hard, but bluffing him was close to impossible. Sending Whud home with an empty pocket became a life-long obsession for some players. The English chap confessed to the barber that he became super superstitious after he met the chicken man. To other players’ great disappointment, the more Whud became famous in the poker world, the less frequently he showed up. After I knew about Whud, I tried to figure out his card tricks. His games were closely observed for years but nothing intriguing turned up. I also spied on Whud at his place and found out that he didn’t even own a deck of cards. It was a total conundrum. Completely isolated from the rest of the world, he didn’t give me any other sources to explore such as family members, neighbors, or friends. I didn’t and still haven’t found a way to interview animals. His bird could have easily let me in on many secrets for a fistful of worm-flavored crunchy bird feed. After caught by Whud, I came up with a couple of theo-

ries about the master player. Nevertheless, it was too late and impossible to confirm those hypotheses without risking my own secret a step further.



SOMEWHERE OVER 40 WINKS

